

## Book Review / Compte rendu

**Leitch, Thomas (2014). *Wikipedia U: Knowledge, Authority and Liberal Education in the Digital Age*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. Pages: 176. Price: \$29.95 US (hardcover/e-book).**

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I was drawn to this book, as I imagine many higher education teachers would be, because I thought it would help me to make a more informed decision on the place of *Wikipedia* in the contemporary classroom. This readable little volume certainly fulfilled that particular curiosity. On that basis alone, it would be of interest to educators in most disciplines or fields, as well as to the educated layperson who wants to know to what extent Wikipedia can be trusted. For educators in disciplines closely associated with liberal education (notably the humanities and to a lesser extent, the social sciences), this book offers an engaging discussion of important questions of authority. While many scholars have explored the vast topic of authority in greater depth, the unique contribution of Leitch's book is how he uses an extended investigation of Wikipedia to raise and discuss these issues in a way that allows young students to make connections to their own experiences.

In the *Introduction*, Leitch outlines sociological and philosophical understandings of authority and discusses how they are being challenged by the continually increasing availability of on-line resources. He characterizes authority within the academy as traditionally resting on printed books and journals, with open access, on-line information being viewed somewhat dubiously by many scholars. While this discussion is brief, it serves to set the stage for his more extended exploration of *Wikipedia* as a case study that illuminates what he sees as a contemporary crisis of authority within liberal education.

Providing essential information on the origin of Wikipedia, Leitch frames his opening chapter *Origin Stories* as four different narratives: Wikipedia's own description of its origin; Wikipedia's evolution from generic *wiki* software originally intended to enhance on-line collaboration; the parallel evolution of Wikipedia, personal computing and the world-wide web; and the relationship between traditional encyclopedias such as *Encyclopedia Britannica* and Wikipedia. Although much of this information is likely to be famil-

iar to many readers, Leitch's presentation of it in the form of narratives and his discussion of those narratives leaves the reader with a nuanced understanding of the development of the Wikipedia phenomenon.

The next chapter, *Paradoxes of Authority*, is a seminal one in the unfolding of Leitch's critique of Wikipedia's credibility as an authoritative source. In it, he explores the inner workings of Wikipedia's editorial policy and the implications of three principles it uses to govern content. Although Wikipedia, according to Leitch, presents an image of a radical democracy, it does operate according to governance rules with regard to who can edit what and when. An internal hierarchy exists in Wikipedia, organized according to familiar bureaucratic principles. Thus Wikipedia's claim to consensual authority through "the voice of the people" is mitigated by the presence within the hierarchy of positions that have a higher level of editorial authority than an entry-level contributor. Leitch then investigates the paradoxes of authority implicit in Wikipedia's three Core Content Principles: *Verifiability*, *Neutrality*, and *No Original Research*. As the author explains, Wikipedia's Verifiability principle is not seeking to ensure that its published articles contain "truth," but only that the information comes from a reliable published source. Indeed, Leitch points out that Wikipedia displays a preference for academic and peer-reviewed publications, essentially deferring authority to the academy, rather than staking a claim as a new democratic, consensual authority. Leitch next takes issue with Wikipedia's Neutrality policy, arguing that writing neutrally is also a point of view. Using the example of Wikipedia articles on the Holocaust and Holocaust denial, he demonstrates that the Wikipedia policy can at best result in accurate reporting of consensual thinking on a topic, rather than complete neutrality. Turning to the No Original Research principle, Leitch describes Wikipedia as self-identifying as a tertiary source and offers a lively account of how the NOR principle has been debated within the Wikipedia community itself. Attempts to apply this principal lead to questions about the line between original and secondary research and about reporting on fringe research that has not yet attained scholarly acceptance. With this last point, Leitch segues deftly to how questions of authority are handled in other self-admitted tertiary sources such as *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *Reader's Digest*, before turning to look at paradoxes of authority with the academy, and especially liberal education, that do and do not parallel the paradoxes inherent in Wikipedia.

In *The Case against Wikipedia*, the fifth and longest chapter, Leitch offers all the arguments any professor could wish for when advising students not to cite Wikipedia as a source in essays. Leitch draws substantially from the *The cult of the amateur* (Keen, 2007), supplementing Keen's arguments about the world wide web with observations culled from other writers on this topic, and of course, his own insights. One of the most important criticisms of Wikipedia is that crowdsourcing will not necessarily produce freedom from factual error or an authoritative voice. Leitch refers to the "Family Feud" effect, a game show in which contestants are rewarded for guessing not the right answer, but what most people thought was the right answer. Other weaknesses of Wikipedia include a reliance on already received truths rather than original ideas, an insistence on anonymity which diminishes accountability, and a tendency to value amateurism over professionalism.

After thoroughly deconstructing Wikipedia in a scholarly way, Leitch provides in the next chapter several excellent examples of how he and other professors have approached having students arrive at some of the same critical understandings through in-class ex-

ercises and assignments. (Reading this chapter made me wish I had taken a class from Leitch!) Using a focus on Wikipedia as a starting point, these exercises can hone the very qualities valued in liberal education (critical thinking, questioning attitudes to authority, communication and collaboration skills, etc.). Many more useful ideas for incorporating Wikipedia in the classroom are contained in the book's Appendix.

Leitch looks to the future of Wikipedia and the future of liberal education in his concluding chapter. For Wikipedia, he envisions several possible futures: failure brought about by external factors such as commercialization of the Web, continued expansion (Wikipedia's own goal), a changed Wikipedia influenced by, among other possibilities, the availability of open access journals such as *CJHE*, and fragmentation into a wide variety of specialized encyclopedias. His most chilling scenario is his description of what might occur with the advent of Web 3.0, when machines communicate with other machines, and the human role is reduced to information consumption, with little questioning of the authority of the factoids provided. Such widespread lack of criticality, Leitch opines, would also be the demise of liberal education. Leitch calls on teachers to continue to foster critical thinking that examines and compares authority, and encourages them to use Wikipedia as a tool to motivate students in this process. I recommend this book as a very helpful resource for professors who want to take up this challenge. 🍁

### Reference

Keen, A. (2007). *The cult of the amateur: How blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the rest of today's user-generated media are destroying our economy, our culture, and our values*. New York: Doubleday.